

***Italo-American Los Angeles***  
**by Gloria Lothrop**

Cal Poly Pomona University Library

## ***Italo-American Los Angeles Summary***

Gloria Ricci Lothrop was a professor of history at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. This narrative recounts the roles of Italian-Americans in Los Angeles history from the Spanish colonial period through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Subject Headings**

Italian Americans

Los Angeles (Calif.) – History

## **Legal Statement**

Copyright unknown. Some materials in these collections may be protected by the U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). In addition, the reproduction, and/or commercial use, of some materials may be restricted by gift or purchase agreements, donor restrictions, privacy and publicity rights, licensing agreement(s), and/or trademark rights. Distribution or reproduction of materials protected by copyright beyond that allowed by fair use requires the written permission of the copyright owners. To the extent other restrictions apply, permission for distribution or reproduction from the applicable rights holder is also required. Responsibility for obtaining permissions, and for any use rests exclusively with the user.

## **Table of Contents**

	<u>Page</u>
Italians in Spanish and Mexican California	1
Influence in Early Los Angeles	2
Italian-American Organizations	3
Contributions in Culture and Industry	5
After World War II	6

# Italo-American Los Angeles

July 15, 1980

*Narrator is unidentified  
Transcribed by Lorecel Gravino*

The history of Los Angeles is told in the very cadences of its multiethnic people. Some estimate that they comprise the most diverse urban population in the United States. One quarter of a million of these Angeleno's by choice, are of Italian descent. Their reasons for choosing the city as home differ widely and their many contributions have been varied. But all carry forward the long, rich heritage of the Italo-American community of Los Angeles.

Italian influence even preceded the actual founding of the Pueblo in 1781, nearly 250 years before Spain's casual interest in these northern reaches of empire was intensified by the discoveries of the Coronado expedition, which arched through the American southwest. Among those explorers searching for the elusive seven cities of gold was the Italian, Fray Marcos de Niza. Evidence also suggests that it was Bartolomé Ferrelo, a Levantine, Italian navigator who directed the exploration of California coastal waters after Juan Cabrillo's untimely death during the 1542 expedition.

Spanish claim to this area was later strengthened through the efforts of Jesuit priests, the most famous being the Padre on Horseback, Eusebio Kino, a zealous Apostolic man of the best blood of Sicily. It was he who declared in 1702, "California, no Nero Isola." The myth of the fabled island of Califia ended and plans for missionary expansion began. First in Baja, California, under the direction of Father Juan María [de] Salvatierra, born of a noble Hispano-Italian family in Milan in 1648. With the aid of fellow Jesuits including fathers Francesco Piccolo, Giovanni Ugarte and Francesco Clavatierro, Salvatierra extended the mission perimeter and established the Pious Fund, which for the next century and a half would help support these outposts of Christianity, including the 21 missions later built in Alta, California by the followers of Saint Francis of Assisi. Not until 1769 was the first of the Franciscan chain built at San Diego, following a plan of settlement outlined by Antonio María [de] Bucareli, a Spanish viceroy who apparently was also of Italian ancestry. Soon after several Italians visited the Spanish outpost which edged the coast along El Camino Real. The first to actually anchor offshore was captain Alessandro [Alejandro] Malaspina, who visited during his circumnavigation of the globe, so impressed was he with the climate and hospitality that he returned in 1791.

Three decades later, Paolo Emilio [Paul-Émile] Botta, doctor aboard a French ship which made anchor, recorded his views for later publication in Italy entitled, *Viaggio Intorno Al Globo: Principalmente Alla California Ed Alle Isolle Sandwich*. Shortly after, California became part of an independent Mexico, Italian visitors increased. In *Two Years Before the Mast*, Richard Henry Dana tells of the arrival of the Genoese barque Rosa. Undoubtedly laden with large blocks of carrara marble, the usual ballast used on Italian ships visiting the California coast. Dana describes the Italian sailors at San Pedro in blue jackets, scarlet caps, bound ashore on Liberty

singing, 'O pescator dell'onda'. The young seamen were headed for the settlement of Los Angeles, located inland on a plane, first sighted by Europeans in 1769 and described by Father Juan Crespi as "good land for planting all kinds of grains and seeds".

In the building surrounding the central plaza of the town, several Italians claimed residence. Giovanni Battista Leandri after arriving in 1823 became a storekeeper on Calla de los Negros, a justice of the peace and part owner of Rancho San Pedro and Rancho Los Coyotes. With his wife, he resided until his death in a house directly adjacent to the site of the current Plaza fire station. Across the Plaza lived Father Blas Raho, a Neapolitan described by Harrison Newmark as a "genial broad-minded Italian." In 1857 and 1858 he made several attempts to repair the Plaza church. In that same decade, Giuseppe Gazza, and an Italian from Trieste, Giuseppe Cavacichi, operated several wine cellars on Olvera Street, then known then as Wine or Vine Street. Another native of Trieste, Mateo [Matias] Sabichi, a seaman, married Josefa Coronel and constructed a townhouse on the southeast corner of the Plaza. After their early death, the two Sabichi sons were educated abroad. Frank a lawyer, returned to serve as member of the City Council for a decade and its president from 1872 to 1873.

Another early Italian settler was Antonio Pelanconi, who married Isabel Ramirez shortly after his arrival in 1860. Their home, the oldest brick building in Los Angeles, still stands on Olvera Street. After Pelanconi's death, his widow married Giacomo Tononi, they became successful wine makers extending their operations from the family home to a site facing Alameda Street. Family properties later included the Tononi Block which stood until the 1950's as well as portions of Rancho San Raphael, which today still bear their name.

The oldest adobe remaining in Los Angeles, the Ávila Adobe on Olvera Street was also occupied by Italians. At one time, Secondo Guasti and Rosa Morelli operated a restaurant in the building. In the 1880s it was a boardinghouse, known as the Hotel d'Italia Unita. The grapes still thriving in the patio may have inspired Guasti, a hearty Piedmontese, to establish in the sands of Cucamonga what came to be called, the "Globe's Largest Vineyard," the Italian Vineyard Company, where he produced millions of gallons of dessert wines, including his [*vignole*].

Scores of Italians worked the Southern California land. Beginning in 1880, Angelo Domenigoni, raised wheat and barley on 3000 acres east of Los Angeles. In Puente, Joseph Ferrero, a Piedmontese farmed 85 acres. Italo-Americans named, Righetti, Moretti, and Garbani, to name a few, tilled the rich land and prospered. Others became successful entrepreneurs. [*Unintelligible*] was respected as a merchant, as was Genoese, Alessandro Cuneo of San Gabriel and Marcellina Bernasconi, mother of six and proprietress of the Southern Hotel at Perris.

Street names remind us of yet another Italian settler. The large, honest, and frugal Alessandro Repetto. In 1874, to his isolated ranch nine miles from Los Angeles came the fame bandit Tiburcio Vásquez, who demanded \$800 purportedly to finance a revolution in Baja California. A decade later, the lonely settler died at the Sister's Hospital on Ann Street. James Castruccio, Italian Consul and President of the Italian Benevolent Society, along with a few members made up the congregation of mourners in the Italian church on San Fernando Street. The ranch of course was later sold, and it became the community of Montebello.

By the 1870s, nearly half the city's residents were foreign born. Among the new arrivals clustering near Eternity Street and New High Street were Mateo Palma, Lorenzo Garibaldi, and Carlo Rinaldi. The 1872 city directory reveals that they were served by local merchants Vignolo and Sanguinetti on Main and Commercial Streets and Joseph Oliva among the earliest shopkeepers on Aliso and Alameda Streets. There was a special Italian mood near the 600 block of San Fernando or Main Street' there was the Martinoli Bakery and Carbello and Garcia Construction. Most of the block, however, was occupied by the various enterprises conducted by Giovanni Piuma, an early Italian consular agent and founder of a restaurant which still serves Los Angeles. By the turn of the century, the historic Pico House nearby was acquired by the Pagliano family who owned it until the 1950s when the state acquired it as part of the proposed El Pueblo State Historic Park.

In response to the needs and interests of the growing community, the Italian Mutual Benevolent Society was formed and soon grew to a membership of 120. Founding officers Vignolo, Pelanconi, Marcotte, and Ginocchio could hardly have anticipated their success. In 1977, the Garibaldina Society, its successor, celebrated the organization's centennial.

By 1900, the 1,062 Italians in Los Angeles had become avid readers of their local newspaper, *Le Col de la Colonia*. In 1908, it would become *Italo-Americano*. The community also sought a meeting place. Accordingly, in 1907, the Puccio Construction Company completed the Italian Hall at Macy and Main Streets. Its upper floor was to be the site of festivities sponsored by the Italian Benevolent Society, Il Circolo Operaio Italiano, and others. Today, the sturdy brick building graced by a [David Alfaro] Siqueiros mural currently being restored, has been forgotten by Los Angeles Italians despite its continuing invitation now accepted only by the dust and dirt and lonely litter along North Main Street.

Italians nostalgic for their native land, gathered at Madame Zucca's or visited with Borza, the photographer. They regularly claimed their mail at Tognetti Cigar Factory, where the men often stole a glance at the beautiful Angelina hailed by the editors of *Le Col de la Colonia* as the most beautiful woman in the colony. The new arrivals pursued dozens of new business activities. By 1909, they dominated the produce markets at 3rd and Central. Italians have been credited with introducing the Sicilian lemon as well as the commercial sale of bell peppers, artichokes, eggplant, and broccoli.

By 1917, an avalanche of immigration had brought 10,000 Italians to Los Angeles. They now represented 6% of the city's population. A contemporary survey also revealed that of all national groups in the city, Italians were the 5th largest number of homeowners stretching from North Broadway to Highland Park, as well as to Alvarado Terrace and Adams. Those new arrivals who clustered around Castelar Street School were patiently instructed by Isabella Vignolo, organizer of the first Los Angeles city classes for non-English speaking adults. She was also a leader in the formation of the Italian Red Cross, and with Mrs. Lorenza Bessolo, a founder of the Italian Women's Club. A mere four blocks away, Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini established her School for Girls. Today, the vacant site on Hill Street overlooking the Civic Center betrays not a whisper of the heroic narrative of Los Santina, and her missionary sisters of the Sacred Heart, who in 30 years established 67 mission houses where 5000 youngsters were given shelter and 100,000 patients were cared for.

Francesco Franceschi, or Doctor Emanuele Orazio Fenzi, was another Italian who was making an indelible impression upon Southern California. Between 1904 and 1931, at a Santa Barbara home known as Montariso, this gifted Florentine introduced more plants to California than any other individual or firm. Before leaving for Libya, where the Italian government had asked him to develop an agricultural program, Franceschi had propagated in his 40-acre experimental park such seeming natives as the *pittosporum* and pineapple guava. Indeed, the Southern California land was fertile and productive causing Los Angeles County to be the leading agricultural County in the United States until the 1950s.

Soon however, oil, aircraft, films, and the fashion business, stimulated the city's commercial life making greater Los Angeles today, number twelve in terms of the gross economic production of all countries and national regions in the world. Capital formation critical to this transformation was supplied by such institutions as Security Pacific Bank, the successor to Southern California Security Trust and Savings Bank, headed by Iowa-born Italian Joseph Sartori. Another Italian American, Victor Rossetti, served as Vice President of Hellman's Bank. Today, at least four Italian banks have Los Angeles branches. Without question, however, it was Amadeo Giannini's Bank of Italy, now the Bank of America, which was the innovative pioneer with branch banking, specialized agricultural loans and services suited to small savers.

As more citizens crowded the sunlit landscape, a new enthusiasm for things Italian found expression among Californians, who noted the similarities in the Mediterranean climates of each. Communities emerged with such Italianate names such as Arcadia, Rialto, Verona, and Venice. The latter was the creation of Abbot Kinney, who, in 1905, gave reality to his dream of Venice in America. Using the family fortune from the manufacture of sweet caporal cigarettes, he began building 16 miles of waterways, while the success of the canals the gondoliers and the miniatures Saint Mark's square was short-lived, the enthusiasm was contagious. Articles abounded entitled, "The Italy of California: what we can learn from Rome" and "Italy's Message to California."

The fascination was reflected in landscape design and the choice of street names ranging from Trada Corda to Bellaggio Road. It was reflected as well in the architecture, including the recreation of a Tuscan farmhouse in Palos Verdes and the introduction of Romanesque accents in University courtyards, as well as the use of Renaissance facsimiles amidst the verdure. This effort to create Nuova Italia is reflected in its full splendor in the South Pasadena estate of John S. Tanner, designed in 1917 by architect Reginald Johnson.

By the 1920s, Los Angeles experienced another economic boom stimulated in part by the burgeoning population which now flow through the Panama Canal into San Pedro harbor. Rows of tile roof Spanish bungalows were clustered around impressive public centers enhanced by the skills of gifted artisans exemplified by the Sgraffito designs created by Italian artists on the walls of the Southern California Gas Company branch office in Pasadena.

In 1923, when the Biltmore Hotel opened its doors, notable highlights were the wall and ceiling murals executed by Giovanni Battista Smeraldi, whose paintings also graced the Blue Room of the White House. The Oaklawn Waiting Station and Bridge in South Pasadena still stand as tributes to the artistry and skill of Italian Michael de Palo.



In 1917 Hubert Eaton founded a memorial park, Forest Lawn, which eventually included a reproduction of "The David" by Michelangelo, as well as a museum containing the artist's sketches. Tourists have been enraptured by the stained-glass reproduction of DaVinci's "Last Supper" and they often pause before the largest sculpture group in the park, "The Mystery of Life" executed by Doctor Ernesto Gaggeri of Rome.

Italian musicians also influence the local scene. In 1871, M. Aravalli served as director of the Los Angeles Musical Association. Decades later, Maestro Gaetano Merola, musical director of the San Carlo Opera Company, founded in 1924, the Los Angeles Grand Opera Association. Since the mid nineteenth century, California opera lovers have been delighted by such divas as Eliza Biscaccianti and Luisa Tetrazzini, but by none more than the beloved Adelina Patti, who made several farewell tours of the state. Always counting her fee beforehand backstage, while the audience chanted, "only to hear you Patti, only to hear you squeak, only to pay \$7.00 and starve the rest of the week".

No less a focus of Italian artistic expression was Hollywood. Lured by climate and scenic variety, film studios competed in creating fantasies for audiences enchanted by Pola Negri, Theda Bara, and Rodolfo [Rudolph] Valentino. These artists blended into the Italian community of Los Angeles referred to as La Colonia. Its citizens were equally as gracious and enthusiastic and welcoming the Italian team to the 1932 Olympic Games staged at Los Angeles.

A variety of diversions was provided by organizations ranging from the Corte de Gloria of the Independent Order of Foresters, to the Dante Alighieri post of the American Legion, and the Ex Combatente. Cultural activities included legitimate theater, functions associated with Le Scorie di Giovanni Pascoli and invariably Sunday picnics at Montebello. All was reported by Cleto Baroni who assumed from his uncle the editor ship of *L'italo-Americano* and continued an unbroken record of publication lasting over seven decades. A tradition which continues under the current editor Father Mario Trecco.

The appearance in the 1920s and 30s of radio programs and other papers including *La Parola*, provided ample opportunities for writers and poets like Maria Angeli Ricci, author of [*unintelligible*] to express their nostalgia for their distant homeland and also share the personal discovery of their new land. Unfortunately, the blending of the two Mediterranean cultures was shadowed by the clouds of war.

Italian resident aliens experienced certain restrictions, but more was the anguish and uncertainty as phalanxes of axis then allies, left a trail of destruction from Sicily to the Po. Victory was slow in coming for all, but with its advent a new prosperity descended upon the Southland. War had stimulated the aircraft and shipbuilding industries; it had brought workers and soldiers to the coast. Many of those 300,000 GIs returned, some with war brides to settle where oranges once grew. Italian enterprise was at the forefront in both construction and real estate development.

The automobile provided the indispensable link between this expanding suburbia and the world of work. By 1910, Angeleno's already had more cars per capita than any other city in the world and the new automania was supplied by such dealers as Basso Motors, Sartori Motors, and

Pozzani Motors. In fact, Pozzani advised in the building of the Arroyo Seco Parkway which opened in 1939 as the first link in a freeway system that would span the state.

With the post war population explosion, a new group of Italo-Americans generated vitality into La Colonia. Earlier arrivals had drifted from North Broadway leaving only ten Italian families in Father Donanzan's Saint Peters Parish in 1968. However, the parish became a center of new ethnic awareness, La Casa Italiana its center, a gathering place for a score of Italian groups. It is particularly appropriate that this center is accented by a sculpture entitled "The Immigrants," a graceful, dynamic reminder of the energy of Italian settlers in this land. The sculpture was presented by the Patrons of Italian Culture founded by Roy Ventress, and others for all devoted to the Italian tradition. The organization encourages the cultivation of the Italian culture in many ways, including an annual speech contest to open to high school and college students.

There is much for such a group to view with pride if indeed discrimination clouded the passage of the Italian immigrant on his way to seizing the American dream, that is now past. The increasing cosmopolitanism of Americans has made them enthusiastic devotees of and visitors to La Bella Italia.

There is equal enthusiasm for Italian cuisine as served at Civic Center favorites like Dario's or Little Joe's, and also at such Beverly Hills newcomers as DaVinci's. And certainly no one overlooks the classics like La Scala and the elegant Ristorante Chianti, with its 40-year tradition of excellence. An enticing combination of music and *cucina italiana* greets patrons at Carmelo Monte's La Strada and late evening patrons at Sarno's. While La Barbara's offers something quite different, it shares its mural tribute to the Italian family with passersby on Wilshire Boulevard.

Italian names mark a variety of businesses and are borrowed by others to convey a sense of style and elegance. Nor do advertisers allow us to forget the continuing Italian influence in domestic wine production, as well as imported wines and liquors, valued at \$9.8 million in 1979 in Southern California alone—an increase of 50% since 1978. There is much to remind us of the preeminence of Italian design, particularly evident in the many showrooms of the Pacific Design Center, the creation of Italian architect César Pelli, for Victor Gruen Associates.

Autos, jewelry, and gold represent the bulk of Italian imports to Southern California amounting to almost \$410 million in 1979. But the focus of Italian imports is high fashion apparel and footwear. While these two items represented a little less than 10% of the total value of local Italian imports, the elegant boutiques and shops which are the fashion centers of Rodeo Drive and Canon Drive, as well as on Wilshire and Santa Monica, remind us that the world still treasures the tradition of taste and beauty which have been an Italian hallmark since the days of the Medici.

Indeed, Italo-Americans should be proud of their past, of their contributions and the place they have earned in this new land. We all share in the success of Salvatore, Siciliano, and even Sinatra. We should take pride in the fact that the Los Angeles Philharmonic has garnered worldwide acclaim under the directorship of Maestro Carlo Maria Giulini. We can take pride in the tradition of civic and judicial leadership exemplified by John Ferraro, president of the Los

Angeles City Council. We can be proud of the fact that professional sport rosters include the names of Lasorda, Ferragamo, and Malavasi. We can be delighted by the soaring Watts Towers embellished with tiles and seashells built over three decades by Simon Rodia. We should be charmed with the colorful recapturing of Los Angeles, by artist Leo Politi in more than a dozen children's books. We should be touched by nostalgia as we enter the grounds of the Getty museum where Italian artisans have so completely captured the splendor of the Villa de Papyri. We can be proud that the theories of Italian educational leader, Maria Montessori, have gained such currency and respect among Southern Californians. We should take pride in the art collections and libraries devoted to Italy and no less to Italian scholars, among them Andrew Rolle, who has traced the impact of immigration upon both ties and traditions.

The early settlers have long gone, left to history are the records of their accomplishments as early agriculturalists and entrepreneurs. Only their echoed names remain to give dimension to our present, a present where we must rediscover the common themes of the Italian experience in America. The importance of industry, the closeness of family, the joyous optimism, which often softens a native skepticism and an abiding love for the Italian tradition. These must be rediscovered by each successive generation of descendants of Italy, a nation of poets and artists, of heroes and saints, of thinkers and scientists, of migrants and navigators. *Ciao.*

# Index

	<u>Page Number</u>
Ávila Adobe	2
Bara, Theda	5
Baroni, Cleto	5
Bernasconi, Marcellina	2
Bessolo, Lorenza	3
Biscaccianti, Eliza	5
Borza	3
Botta, Paolo Emilio [Paul-Émile]	1
Bucareli, Antonio María [de]	1
Cabrillo, Juan	1
Carbello and Garcia Construction	3
Castelar Street School	3
Castruccio, James	2
Cavacichi, Giuseppe	2
Clavatierro, Francesco	1
Coronado expedition	1
Coronel, Josefa	2
Crespí, Juan	2
Cuneo, Alessandro	2
Dana, Richard Henry	1
de Palo, Michael	4
Domenigoni, Angelo	2
Donanzan, Father	6
Eaton, Hurbert	5
Ferraro, John	6
Ferrelo, Bartolomé	1
Ferrero, Joseph	2
Frances Xavier Cabrini, Saint	3
Franceschi, Francesco	4

	<u>Page Number</u>
Garibaldi, Lorenzo	3
Garibaldina Society	3
Gazza, Giuseppe	2
Gazzeri, Ernesto	5
Giannini, Amadeo	4
Ginnocchio	3
Giulini, Carlo Maria	6
Guasti, Secondo	2
Hotel d'Italia Unita	2
Italian Mutual Benevolent Society	3
Italian Red Cross	3
Italian Vineyard Company	2
Italian Women's Club	3
Johnson, Reginald	4
Kinney, Abbot	4
Kino, Eusebio	1
Leandri, Giovanni Battista	2
Leonardo da Vinci	5
Madame Zucca's	3
Malaspina, Alessandro [Alejandro]	1
Marcotte	3
Martinoli Bakery	3
Merola, Gaetano	5
Michaelangelo	5
Montessori, Maria	7
Morelli, Rosa	2
Negri, Pola	5
Newmark, Harrison	2
Niza, Fray Marcos de	1
Oliva, Joseph	3
Pagliano Family	3

	<u>Page Number</u>
Palma, Mateo	3
Patti, Adelina	5
Pelanconi, Antonio	2-3
Pelli, César	6
Piccolo, Francesco	1
Pico House	3
Pious Fund	1
Piuma, Giovanni	3
Politi, Leo	7
Puccio Construction Company	3
Raho, Blas	2
Ramirez, Isabel	2
Repetto, Alessandro	2
Ricci, Maria Angeli	5
Rinaldi, Carlo	3
Rodia, Simon	7
Rossetti, Victor	4
Sabichi, Frank	2
Sabichi, Mateo [Matias]	2
Salvatierra, Father Juan María [de]	1
Sartori, Joseph	4
Siqueiros, David Alfaro	3
Smeraldi, Giovanni Battista	4
Tanner, John S.	4
Tetrazzini, Luisa	5
Tononi, Giacomo	2
Trecco, Mario	5
Ugarte, Giovanni	1
Valentino, Rudolph	5
Vásquez, Tiburcio	2
Ventress, Roy	6

	<u>Page Number</u>
Vignolo,	3
Vignolo, Isabella	3